

Chapter 16 – Advancement

Callum toyed with the key fob he'd put the glamour focus into, marveling at how much smaller it was when done by machine rather than hand. He had ended up buying some cooking and electronics supplies to actually get the paste into place and tamp it down or pick it out, depending on how well he managed the enchanting. Fortunately with the pattern already in place there wasn't all that much he could mess up, so it hadn't taken him too many tries.

He was pretty sure he *had* messed up with his timing. In order to help figure out what was going on with the teleportation enchantments he'd staked out the teleporter that Gayle used and had arrived three hours earlier than their intended meeting time. He didn't know how prompt Gayle was, or whether she did anything else while she was in town, so he'd erred on the side of caution.

The problem was that three hours was a very, very long time to wait and stare at a single point. Even if he could close his eyes, it was still tedious and boring and closing his eyes just meant that he wanted to nap. Trying to read or study was a problem in a different way because then he didn't focus on the teleporter.

Time crept by very, very slowly. To fill the dead space, Callum did some basic exercises, trying to keep himself from going soft, but even that wasn't something he could keep up the whole time. Callum kept catching his attention wandering and snapped it back to the teleporter, and after the thirteenth or fourteenth time he decided he'd never be a good guard. It was closing on two and a half hours watching from the roof of a nearby building when he finally noticed a flare of magic. The mana passing through the enchantment defined a cylinder, and pulsed maybe a dozen times over two or three seconds.

A moment after that it flickered, and Gayle appeared in the circle. Callum was fairly certain it wasn't the one-way teleportation; it looked more like the swap than it did the simpler formation. It definitely was not a portal, but he'd already figured that much. Unfortunately, since it was practically impossible to look inside an enchantment, he couldn't tell what bits did what. Of course, it was also the receiver, so hopefully when Gayle went back he'd get a better idea.

He could easily have followed Gayle to the library, given how completely blind she was in magical terms, but that would have just made him feel like a weird stalker. While he might live outside magical law, there were some pretty severe limits on what he would let himself do. Creeping on young girls was definitely out of bounds. Even if Gayle was probably only five years younger than him, he still couldn't think of her as anything but a kid.

Callum waited a good twenty minutes before following after her, doublechecking to make sure he had his reference notes with him. The main sticking points for Gayle's ability to opt out of apprenticeship were communication, movement and shielding. While it made sense that any mature mage would have a focus or native ability to do all the tricks on the list, it was obviously never meant to be possible.

Some types had it easy with a few of the requirements. All of the elements could attack, but only air had any real communication ability native to it, and getting movement abilities out of the elements required a lot of control and power. For shields, he didn't know if the healing aspect had any options at all. Fulfilling *all* the criteria with shaping mana, homemade foci, and the limits of vis pretty much required an older mage helping. Which was already the definition of apprenticeship.

Fortunately for Gayle, she had a cheat in the form of Callum. He'd actually chewed over whether he wanted to keep the collaboration going, now that he had access to literature, but he didn't feel right just abandoning her to own devices. Not while they still hadn't wrapped up her own issues. Besides, not only was there nothing to connect Professor Brown with the vampire killer GAR was chasing hundreds of miles away, but he also was learning a lot from watching Gayle work.

As usual, books could only teach so much. There were some articulations of the way that vis behaved, not quite like a fluid and not quite like a gas and, when enchanting, not quite like a solid, but none of those descriptions were anything like seeing it for himself. Whatever shortcomings she might have, Gayle absolutely had control of energies to a degree that Callum envied.

It wasn't exactly a finesse, since he was pretty sure he could sense more finely than she could, it was just practice. After another few years he might have the offhand precision that she did, but considering that he didn't have any real drills or even a proper coach he might never get it. With all the will in the world, someone couldn't learn everything on their own.

He strolled into the bookstore at the usual time, finding nobody around save Gayle, not even the Larsons. Which was odd, since he would have thought that they'd at least have someone manning the counter, but there might well be a glamour to keep people away. So far he still couldn't actually see them.

"So did you get anything better than kinesis?" Gayle looked hopeful, but Callum shook his head.

"Since you can only use healing vis or mana, you're stuck with what mana can do. So mostly just glorified kinesis. I don't suppose you're hiding a second aspect somewhere."

“Oh, I wish! It would be so much easier if I had fire or wind or something.” Gayle snapped her fingers. “Boom! Half of the requirements done.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to focus on the mana-based options. At least the requirement isn’t that it’s a *good* movement magic. Because frankly, it’s going to be terrible.”

“Aww.” Gayle pouted. “I guess I’ll have to buy something to let me fly when I get my full mage credentials.” Callum almost asked her what she thought of the limitations before he checked himself. He really didn’t need to try and convince Gayle he was some kind of rogue mage by criticizing the status quo.

“Yeah, for now, there’s just the low-grade levitation.”

“Hey, you’re a gravity mage,” Gayle said, narrowing her eyes. “You can already do travel can’t you?”

“It’s less useful than you’d think, but yes,” he told her.

“Can I see?”

“I suppose,” Callum sighed. He figured he’d have to demonstrate something at some point, so he had been prepared for it. Fortunately he could do a short demonstration without the inertialess spatial movement, just by changing the gravity affecting his chair.

He concentrated and wrapped his magic around the seat, altering the spatial angles until it started floating upward, then he tweaked it to go a little sideways before lowering the power so he wouldn’t bump into the ceiling. He felt absolutely precarious perched on the chair, and not a little silly. A floating wicker chair was kind of ludicrous.

“Oh, neat!” Gayle clearly had a different opinion of it than he did. “I can’t wait ‘til I can do that! Even if it’s bad, it’s still flying! C’mon, let’s get started.”

Callum lowered himself back down, carefully, and manually readjusted the chair before taking out the brass plates. He’d noticed that Gayle had never offered to bring any of her own, and didn’t question the fact that he kept supplying them. It was pretty usual behavior for trust-fund college students, or whatever the equivalent was. It was amazing how blind people could be to how much was provided for them.

While Gayle had to work from scratch, Callum had done a little bit of practice on his own so he wouldn’t look quite so foolish when it came to a much more complicated focus than anything they’d done before. He didn’t technically need it, since he had his own version of telekinesis and, of course, *far* better travel, but it wouldn’t hurt to have more tools. Besides, it wasn’t *just*

a version of telekinesis with higher power limits; there were some flourishes that he wanted to take a look at.

Once again it reminded him of how far behind he was when it came to magic. Calling himself a professor felt overly optimistic even if he wasn't pretending to be a professor of *magic*, just because of how lost he was most of the time. Still, Gayle didn't seem to be too worried about his skills or lack thereof, so long as he was supplying information.

When they finished the focus, Callum found that it took basically all his effort to use it to levitate himself, but Gayle seemed to have no issues. It was pretty humbling to see the difference in their magical oomph, at least when it came to mana manipulation. He'd thought he was doing fairly well on the magical stamina front, but apparently not.

It made him wonder what *trained* spatial mages could do. Probably massive portals and teleports; he'd have an issue teleporting more than a few people, or generating portals larger than a few feet in diameter. Moving entire convoys or even buildings was far, far beyond him, but maybe not to a real mage. Not that he *wanted* to move all that. Just moving himself was enough.

He made sure to leave before Gayle, giving himself time to make his way back to the GAR teleporter and set up his notepad. Unfortunately, it seemed that he'd been too conservative again because it was well over an hour before she *actually* made it back to the teleporter, walking into the office building and making her way over to where the enchantment was inscribed. It was worth the wait.

First, when she pushed mana into the acceptor portion, there was feedback. A complex loop of mana or artificial vis came out and wrapped about her wrist, where her mage tattoo was, before withdrawing. Callum scowled at that, but he wasn't surprised. If everyone had the tattoos, it made sure they were used as a security measure of some sort. His probably wouldn't work, because he definitely wasn't cleared to use them and he'd messed with his anyway.

There was a pause as essentially nothing happened, just some small fluctuations near a particular portion of the enchantment. It was too subtle for Callum to tell what was going on, but he assumed it was some kind of check or security feature or safety feature, mirroring the pulses he'd seen when Gayle arrived. Then a spatial field unfolded from one section of the enchantment, buried underneath the floor, creating the exact same field that he'd seen when she had teleported in.

It flashed, and Gayle was gone. Callum frowned. Perhaps he'd been hasty in judging things, because the very end was somewhat less useful than he would have liked, even if it did go to show that most of the enchantment was there for reasons other than actually forming the

teleport. With all the enchantment complexity he thought there'd be some meshing from the multiple output portions, but there wasn't. It was just one piece.

That was good and bad. It meant that most of what was going on had to do with the teleportation *network* rather than the teleportation. He was trying to study a car to learn how internal combustion worked, when all he really wanted was an engine. So in theory what he wanted was much easier than what he saw, but it was also completely obscured by what he saw.

Callum closed his eyes and focused on feeling the outlines of the enchanted portions with his senses. Now that he knew where to look, he could see that bit of it was actually discrete from the rest. Or rather, there were three parts total. One was the circle, which served to define the framework of where the enchantment went. Then there were the complex pseudo-circuits that controlled everything. What he wanted was a small cylinder directly underneath the circle.

He thought very seriously about just stealing it, but decided if he was going to do that, it would have to be from a different teleporter a *long* distance away. Besides, stealing something that could let people teleport to it was likely an extremely bad idea. The problem was he really needed to see both sides of it, and considering the tattoo security he was even less interested in taking a trip to the other side.

Grumbling to himself, he teleport-hopped back to his motorhome and busied himself with dinner while he considered options. No matter what he did, he'd be tipping his hand a *little* bit, and he still wasn't entirely sure about Harry and Lucy. A thought occurred to him while he was reheating stew in the microwave and he paused to chew it over.

Gayle was obviously very well-to-do, and if the part of the enchantment responsible for actually teleporting was as small as it seemed, portable teleports were probably something that existed. Obviously they'd be restricted to the rich and powerful, though considering that mages generally *were* rich and powerful it'd be only a truly elite cadre that had them.

It was an assumption on his part but he might be able to ask, circumspectly, about it. A portable teleport probably wouldn't count for Gayle's movement magic unless she made it herself, which she obviously couldn't do, but she might know where one was. Otherwise, he'd have to go through Lucy or Harry to see if they had access to one, or records of a defunct teleporter.

Really, the problem was that it was hard to ask after it without tipping his hand too much. Though, teleportation enchantments were probably handy enough that anyone could be excused for wanting to get their hands on one. He'd have to wait until next week for that, but it wasn't like he didn't have his hands full already.

With some disgruntlement he went back to studying and sketching out more to-do foci. One was actually an advanced teleportation focus, because there were certain limitations to the one he had. Mostly, he couldn't fling anything with it, which was a sad state of affairs. Once he had better control over his *vis* he could probably gravity-launch things, but he wasn't there yet. Not nearly.

There were a few other common utility foci that any mage would have lying around. A cantrip that would essentially clean anything that wasn't *too* soiled, basically a magical stain remover, was fantastic and incredibly intricate. Apparently for fae or water-type mages it was extremely easy, but for anyone who was restricted to using mana it took some doing to keep the spellwork from damaging the article in question. There was even a version that a mage could use on himself, which was high on his list of acquisitions.

Others were a basic fire spell and a basic wind blocker. There was no real mind magic, for better or worse, as that seemed the province of the vampires, and other things like tracking down items were exclusive to the fae. For better or worse, human magic couldn't reproduce everything other races could do. Shifting, for example, was thought to be pretty well impossible for a human mage.

Considering that using *vis* internally was generally considered extremely dangerous, Callum agreed. Human mages seemed to use mostly physics, rather than *magic* as such. The glamour enchantment in part seemed to use the properties of mana itself, with how normal people couldn't perceive it, rather than directly affecting anyone's mind or senses. The precise mechanism was far too complex for him to understand, which was probably why the focus for it was more complicated than anything else he'd seen.

A few days later Lucy had some information for him. He didn't want to rely on any phone he used to call her, since it would be possibly compromised. She *was* a self-proclaimed hacker and even if she didn't geolocate every single call, she *could*. Unfortunately that made it difficult for her to call him back, so he had a single dedicated phone that he only powered on every once in a while, sometime before he decided on where he was staying the night, and even that got cycled out once in a while.

"Okay big man, I have some news, but you aren't gonna like it."

"That does not bode well," Callum replied.

"Oh it bodes all kinds of things. Those mundanes you handed off to the shifters? Well, GAR's Department of Acquisitions scooped 'em up and debriefed 'em and all, but..." Lucy let out a breath. "Okay, GAR law is that anyone who brings a mundane into the supernatural world is

responsible for them. Now, those two got brought in by the vamps, so the vamps were responsible.”

“So that means...?” Callum asked, a tension forming in the pit of his stomach.

“Well that means that they got given back to the vamps because they were considered to be the vamp’s responsibility.” Lucy said it all in a rush, as if she was afraid he was going to interrupt her.

“They took two people that I rescued from being killed by vampires, and they gave them *back* to the vampires, and that was because I rescued them *from* vampires?” Callum asked in a soft tone. His vision had gone suddenly blurry and he could taste the adrenaline in his mouth, the news sparking a visceral response that was past anger and into something he couldn’t really describe.

“That’s how the Department of Acquisition works, yeah,” Lucy admitted unhappily.

“I want the names,” Callum ground out. “The vampires, the agents, the whole department.”

“Uh,” Lucy said intelligently. “Look, I understand where you’re coming from but if you’re going to start assaulting vampire nests or GAR property you’re not going to last long, ghost or not.”

“I know,” he said, and shoved some of the rage aside, turning around and finding some of the rum he kept for emergencies such as this one, glad that he’d called from the motorhome instead of the middle of nowhere. He downed a couple mouthfuls and took a few long breaths. “You’re right, I can’t go after them right now. But I still want those names. And locations of all the GAR facilities you can manage.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Lucy protested, but quietly. “I can get behind killing the vamps that way but, I mean, I actually still work for GAR, you know? Kinda sorta.”

“No, no, I’m not going to go on a rampage,” Callum assured her, feeling a little bit better with the alcohol kick. “I just want to make preparations. The more I know, the better I can plan.”

“Right, if you’re sure, then,” Lucy said, clearly reassured by his return to a more normal tone.

“Yeah I can get you stuff. Don’t worry, you’ve still got a lot of credit balance with me.”

“I should hope so,” Callum said, eyeing the bottle of rum and wondering if he should quit while he was ahead or give in and get himself truly sloshed after he was done speaking with Lucy. Alcohol had a tendency to anesthetize him pretty quickly, so it wouldn’t take much more for him to be able to sleep on things. Which would probably be for the best.

“Thanks for the information, no matter how terrible it is,” Callum told her. He didn’t stay on the line to chat, partly because he was feeling like being drunk and that was a terrible thing to do over a phone, and partly because he was a bit mad and didn’t want to take it out on her.

In truth it was exactly the sort of institutional rot he ought to have expected from something like GAR. Normal people – mundanes – weren’t citizens and it had no obligation to them. Worse, GAR was a bureaucracy, run by councils and forms and paperwork, so there was probably no actual *person* involved in the decision. Or rather, there was, but it was just some bureaucrat who looked up the rules based on some vague report and applied them without thinking about anything but getting back to their game of Solitaire.

He checked the document deposit link Lucy had given him a few hours later and found a bunch of maps and addresses, as well as some personnel listings from GAR with notes. The bureaucratic hierarchy at GAR was as bewildering as any large organization, though it was not nearly as large as the government of, say, any reasonably sized country. Maybe similar to a multinational corporation, with the added fillip of an enforcement arm that could use lethal tactics.

Obviously he didn’t have the full chart of every mage everywhere, just some portions of GAR’s public departments. The fact that they could actually deputize any random mage was a little worrying, especially since they’d all been through the draft and so presumably had some base indoctrination to GAR’s orders, and meant that basically *everyone* was potentially a GAR agent. Or rather, all human mages were. The other supernaturals had parallel governance, but quite a few still worked for GAR.

Unsurprisingly, at least to him, basically all the main GAR places were on the east and west coasts. It looked like the primary GAR bases were in upstate New York and southern California, though not in any major cities. With the teleportation network they didn’t need to be, and it probably would have been harder to hide. He very much doubted that glamour protections extended to camouflaging traffic patterns and the like.

The chain of command responsible for the outrage in question was located on the east coast, since even the so-called Midwest branch of GAR was located with the others. Again, it made sense with the teleports but it offended his sense of propriety that the regional governance wasn’t actually in the region.

Even with his ridiculous travel abilities, heading off to New York state was a bit of a long haul for him, so anything he was going to do to deal with people would have to wait until later. Instead, he focused on some more local GAR facilities. There were, unsurprisingly, offices scattered around, which was where most of the teleports were located.

The closest major one was over in Kansas City, so he decided he'd go ahead and have a look at it from a safe distance. The complexity and quality of workmanship on the teleporters and, for that matter, Gayle's bracelet focus were above and beyond anything he'd seen when dealing with the vamps. That had to mean he wasn't seeing what real, state-of-the-art magework was like, as he was mostly disconnected from that world.

Since it was just meant as a brief reconnoiter, Callum took the motorcycle. He wasn't overly pressed for time, either, so he decided against teleporting his bike on the way there. It was an odd experience, really, since he'd become so used to moving at least part by spatial magic, but it gave him more appreciation for what he could do.

His commitment to not teleporting lasted until he hit the city proper, and the traffic therein. There were enough smears of various magic lingering in the air that he didn't think anyone would notice a little bit more, so he turned on his glamour and teleported past traffic jams, using side streets to work his way toward the address on his phone. Which wasn't actually the same address as the actual GAR building, just in case.

It was obvious which building was GAR's even before it came into the range of his senses. The density and energy of the local mana field increased, making the residual tracks of magic use stand out even more, as if it were radiating out from the GAR building. Which it very well might be; he wasn't completely certain how ambient mana *worked*, exactly, other than it did vary from place to place.

The GAR building itself fairly blazed with the warding and protections once he got within a couple blocks. They were a few steps up from the wards that he'd seen the hired mages use for the vampires, the weave tighter and more complex, with many binding points instead of one. He steered his bike off to the side, not exactly parking it since there was no room, but the nearly full lot of the corporate office gave him enough room to pretend to fuss with his saddlebags while he inspected it closer.

While he lacked the vocabulary to articulate what he was seeing, it was obvious this was a professional design, compared to the rather simplistic and slapdash versions of warding he'd seen before. It was certainly harder to push his senses through, but it wasn't impossible so long as he was patient. Once he managed to see past the first ward, there were actually a number of inner wards of about the same construction, wrapped around individual offices or rooms.

Until and unless he improved his capabilities, there was no way he was going to be raiding a GAR office. So he'd have to. There was no way he could let the outrage they committed go unanswered, but at the moment it was beyond his capabilities.

Since the office was occupied, he did have a chance to see people enter and leave through some method other than the teleporter inside. Unsurprisingly, the wards were keyed to the wrist tattoos, just like the teleports were. It only made sense, but it meant that he basically couldn't get anywhere near a GAR ward without it tattling on him. Or so he guessed. It wasn't something he wanted to test.

It also reinforced that he needed to get rid of the tattoo entirely. It was an identifier that he couldn't read and couldn't control, and worse, it was one he'd sabotaged. That was going to be extremely obvious to anyone who knew how to look, and for all he knew it actually had his name in there somewhere. Besides, since he didn't keep a bubble of magic around him at all times, it was far easier for him to pass as a normal person.

While he was there he made sketches of the ward setups, though it was really more notes on certain parts. The setup was far too complicated for him to record all of it, no matter how practiced he was at technical drawings. In a way it mimicked an electronic surveillance system, with the outer ward being an alarmed perimeter with the ability to check people in and out. Presumably the sub-wards were the same, either protecting privacy or sensitive items or information.

Unlike an electronic perimeter, it was a full bubble around the building. Built into the walls, true, but there weren't any gaps even if someone drilled up from the basement. The interesting part was that there were floating bits of more intense spellwork within the ward lines, like sub-spells riding along the rails of the ward, which Callum could only guess at. Possibly they were active surveillance, but he wasn't sure who, if anyone, the ward was tied to. The bit he was watching seemed to go into one of the sub-warded rooms and he didn't want to push things too far.

It still seemed his senses were passive, the act of pushing them through the wards more like squinting and tilting his head to see through a peephole, but if anything were to trigger the alarms it'd be trying to invade the security center. He'd have to go through the list of GAR properties Lucy gave him and see if he *could* set one off just by looking hard. It'd be a bit of a risk, since with the teleporters they could send through any number of agents, but if he was far away and had a good escape route it might be worth trying.

Part of him wanted to see if he could find the magic criminal scene, and Lucy didn't count. Criminal mages had to know all kinds of useful and interesting things, especially when it came to staying off the radar, but that meant it would be even harder for *him* to find them. Besides, he didn't think he was tough enough to hang around with a crowd of actual murderers and thieves.

The thought made him laugh as he turned away and started his motorcycle again. Technically *he* was both of those things, what with his actions against the vampires, but it didn't feel that way. Nobody he had killed was just going about normal business. They'd all been preying on people, mundane and shifter, so it didn't seem like it counted.

It was a distinction that probably only he made. Everyone else in the supernatural world seemed to more or less view normal humans as being some other species that just happened to be useful. Which was not entirely wrong; someone who could blow up a building just by wanting to very hard was clearly not of the same stock as someone who needed tools to do the same.

He drove back home, reaching the motorhome tired and grumpy, because really the entire excursion did nothing but confirm he was just one person and GAR was a big machine. If he'd ever had some fantasy of dealing with GAR in a serious way it was pretty obviously just that: a fantasy.

Once he got more understanding of magic and where he stood, he'd need a long term plan. Even if it was a long term plan to just vanish. His experience with Winut had showed him that just wandering off to the middle of nowhere wasn't actually going to hide him from the supernatural, and he had to admit he wasn't going to just stand around and pretend ignorance if he saw something going down like with the vampires.

The teleportation enchantment was an absolute must-have. He was completely stymied by any way to make his magic work outside his sensory range, since none of the self-contained structures in Harry's magical books actually did anything for spatial magic. So far Callum was not skilled enough to work it out himself, but if he got some useful references maybe he could duplicate it. At that point the world was his oyster, or at least, he only needed to make any given trip once.